

The Cycle of Sin

Judges 2:11-19

(Pretend to take phone call)

Excuse me for a moment while I take this call. It must be pretty important for them to call right at the beginning of the sermon.

Hello, this is Dan. How may I help you...no, it's okay. I'm not busy. What's goin' on?...

You're having a meltdown? What's happening...Is everything alright?...

I see, and you feel miserable....like you'd never been born...

I know you don't want to live like this anymore, but that's the same thing you said the last three times...

I know you feel guilty...no, God hasn't abandoned you, but you have left Him...

You've tried all those things before...and how's that worked out for you?...

Yes, you can escape this endless cycle...How bad do you really want things to change?...

I tell you what. I need to think about my answer to that question for a bit. I have something I need to do, and then I'll call you back. Is that alright? Can you wait a few minutes?

Have you ever felt like my friend here? Have you ever been trapped by a sin? Caught in an endless cycle you can't escape from it? Every time you think you've found victory over your stubborn sin, you turn around and fall into the same trap again?

Every addict knows this feeling. It doesn't matter whether it's drugs, alcohol, porn or illicit sex, shopping, out of control credit card use, gambling. I think every sinner knows this feeling, because sin is addictive. Sin feels good. That's why we do it. If it didn't feel good, it would be easy to defeat. Oh, sure, it feels bad later. We don't like the consequences, but in that moment, that rush, that fleeting satisfaction— it feels so good.

What researchers are finding is that almost anything that triggers certain reward and pleasure centers in the brain can become addictive. If you hook up a crack addict, social media addict, porn addict, and a gambling addict to something that monitors their brain activity and you show them a pipe, Facebook, smut, or a slot machine the same part of their brains light up. But that's what sin does. It gets its clutches into you and doesn't let go. It's a spiritual problem before it's ever a physical problem. If you hook a glutton up to the same equipment and show them a Twinkie, the same part of their brain is going to go off the charts.

Despite what our modern technology can show us, there's nothing new about any of this. We begin a new study this morning in a book of the bible that shows this same cycle of sin repeat itself over and over again. We are a fallen people and it's hard to escape the cycle of sin.

We're going to spend the next few weeks in the book of Judges. Judges is an ancient book. It's more than 3,000 years old. It covers about a 300 year period of history just after their initial conquest of the Promised Land. It's before any of their kings. It's before the temple. It's even before Jerusalem is the capitol of the country.

However, Judges is also a frighteningly modern book. It features diverse culture filled with many competing and contradictory truth claims. It's a culture filled with immense pressures to go along with what "everyone else is doing." Judges has a lot to say about things such understanding God's will for your life and dealing with sexual addiction. It has powerful women and reluctant heroes. There are religious leaders who abandon the ways of God in order to gain money and social acceptance. Sounds like front page news to me.

Judges is fascinating book filled with heroic valor and tragic failure. Its stories are bloody, gritty and sensual. We have Deborah, a female warrior who would give Xena, Warrior Princess a run for her money. We have a small band of raiders that defeats an army of thousands with only clay pots and torches. We have Samson, a mighty warrior who could take on Thor, but who's brought down by a single haircut. We have an assassin who kills the king and escapes by means of the palace toilet. We have one judge who wickedly sacrifices his own daughter to God. We have a supposed holy man who offers up his concubine to be raped by the men of the city, then carves up her murdered corpse and mails it to the twelve tribes of Israel. It sounds like the plot of the latest hit reality television show, except these episodes are scripted not by producers in search of ratings, but simply in the wickedness of the human heart.

The most modern feature of Judges though is the cycle of sin that spirals ever downward. This cycle repeats seven times in the book Judges and gets progressively worse. Judges begins with Israel under the godly leadership and guidance of Joshua, and it ends with Israel so evil that she is nearly indistinguishable from the pagan nations that surround her. When we look at ancient Israel, we see a fallen people, who have a faithful God. Their story is our story. We are a fallen people, but we serve a faithful God.

We will introduce ourselves to the book of Judges by examining this cycle of sin that not only kept Israel in its trap, but many times keeps us in its trap as well. Please open your Bibles to Judges 2.

I. Rebellion

The cycle begins with rebellion as Israel rebels against God's commands, and pursues her own desires. We see this first unfold in 2:11-13:

¹¹ And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. ¹² And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. ¹³ They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth.

Twice it says they abandoned the Lord. This was more than just straying or neglect. They didn't just wander from the truth. This is rebellion. They turned their back on God's commands and they actively pursued other gods. They worshipped and served idols.

Baal and Ashtaroth (Asherah or Ashtoreth) were god and goddess of the Canaanite nations that were in the land. They were carved in stones and their images placed on poles and altars at various shrines throughout the country. Baal was associated with the sun and storms and Ashtaroth with sex and fertility. The worship of these idols was both cruel and salacious. In addition to the typical animal sacrifices, there was human sacrifice. There was ritual sex and prostitution, including child prostitution. Ashtaroth was both Baal's mother and lover, so you can imagine the sort of things that happened in worship.

Our story is the same. Only the names have changed. Some of us were born and raised in the church. You grew up in a Christian home, but you came to a point in your life where you rebelled against that. You pursued your own thing. Others of us weren't raised in Christian homes, but we ignored our consciences. We heard the voices of warning, but we ignored them. We decided not to search for the truth, and followed the path of our own creation.

Oh, we don't worship and pray to carved statues, but we worship false gods all the same. They are not called Baal and Ashtaroth. Our idols are things like money, career, hobbies, popularity, pleasure and the relentless pursuit of likes, retweets, and followers. Our false gods come in the shape of boats and cars, the latest fashions.

We bow at the altar of self as we serve me, myself, and I. We worship our own pride and ego as we post false images of ourselves online for everyone else to believe. We curate and cultivate this false persona, this alter-ego until the real you could never keep up with the fake you. We become obsessed with achievement and advancement. We sacrifice our relationships with God and family to spend 60 to 80 hours a week running on some corporate hamster wheel all to get that raise, that promotion, to close that next deal. Meanwhile, our families are starved for attention and love. Our souls have almost withered to nothing. We say we're doing it all for them- to give them a better life, but the truth is we're only doing it for ourselves.

We bow at the altar of stuff. We stuff our homes until they are crammed with all manner of Possessions. We build bigger houses with more storage. We rent storage units and build sheds to house all the things we buy, much which we haven't even paid for yet. Our treasures quickly become trinkets as the next greatest thing comes out. We consign our old stuff to the backyard shed, so we can rush out to buy the next new thing and the whole process starts all over again. None of this makes any more sense than bowing down to a carved rock that you pretend puts food on your table. All of this is rebellion against God.

II. Rejection

After our rebellion against God, we experience his rejection. Look at Judges 2:14-15

¹⁴ *So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies.*

This isn't a permanent rejection, but rather a temporary letting you go. The key phrase here is, "he gave them over." This is something we see multiple times in Scripture when people rebel against God, and God says, "Fine, if that's how you want it, then have at it." "You'd rather have that than me? Go ahead." He removes his blessing. He removes his protection, and simply lets you enjoy the consequences of your own choices. It's like a mother who has repeatedly warned her young child not to touch the top of the stove. Numerous times she has rescued the youngster, pulling his hand away at the last second. But he keeps ignoring her instruction, so finally she chooses to let him experience the pain of a hot stove.

Psalm 81:11-12 says something similar:

11 "But my people would not listen to me;
Israel would not submit to me.

12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts
to follow their own devices.

In Matthew 15 Jesus is talking to his disciples about the poison of the Pharisees, and in verse 14 he tells the disciples. *“Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”* “Let them go,” Jesus says. “Let them chase after what they want to pursue, but don’t go after them. You’ll just end up in the same pit as them.”

This isn’t just true of ancient Israel or the Pharisees. It’s the trouble with the whole world. Paul tells us in Romans 1 that since we have chosen to ignore God, to ignore the clear and plain evidence of his power that is all around us in creation, that God has given us up. He’s rejected sinful man, and allows us to experience the full fruit of our sinful desires. Three times Paul says this. Verse 24, *“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.”* Verse 26, *“For them reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.”* Verse 28,

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

And that’s just one hour on Facebook or Netflix. And so God’s rejection follows our rebellion.

III. **Ruin**

What do you suppose happens when God removes his blessing and he removes his divine protection and allows us to experience the full consequences of our choices? The third step in this cycle of sin is ruin. This is what happens to Israel as she faces ruin at the hands of her enemies. Verse 15 says,

¹⁵ *Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them for harm, as the Lord had warned, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.*

God used to march with Israel into battle, but now his hand of protection and provision is no longer with them. In fact, his hand is against them. Early in their history Israel defeated power after power, but now, it seems every tin-pot tyrant wannabe is able to wipe the floor with them. In the book of Judges, they lose their cities; they lose their crops, their flocks, and their sons and daughters. They are taxed oppressively. Their economy shattered. They face ruin

When we are caught in our own cycle of sin we also experience ruin in our own ways. We may lose our job, and our career comes crashing down. We wreck our marriages and lose our families. We lose our good name and our word means nothing. We lose our hope. We lose our will to live. When you turn your back on God and pursue your own sinful desires, no matter how good it feels at the moment, it always leads to ruin. God will let us bury ourselves until we are willing to turn to him

IV. Repentance

Our ruin at the hands of God's rejection often leads to repentance. Once He has removed his blessing and protection, we realize just how much we depended on it. It's like the old saying goes, "You don't know what you've got, until it's gone." This is what happened to Israel each time they fell into ruin. They cried out to God. Judges 3:9 says, "*But when the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, The LORD raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel who saved them.*" These deliverers were called judges. Back in our text in chapter 2:16 it says, "*Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.*"

When you think of a judge in the book of judges don't think of someone in a black robe. This isn't Judge Judy pounding her gavel ruling in favor of the plaintiff. Israel didn't sue their enemies in court. They were warrior / rulers that God used to deliver Israel from their enemies and lead Israel in a time of crisis. Their name comes from a Hebrew word meaning "to pass judgement." In this case God was passing judgment on Israel's enemies through them.

And so Israel would cry out to God in repentance and God responded by providing Judges to deliver them. We too are called to repent from our sin and turn to God. Acts 3:19-20 says, "*Repent, therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.*"

Repentance is when we turn from our sin and turn back to God. The New Testament word for repentance means a change of mind or a change of heart that leads to a change of outcome. Let me give you a couple of examples of how the ancient Greeks used this word. The Greek historian, Thucydides, tells of a time when the council of Athens was responding to a revolt in the city of Mytilene. They originally decided that all the men of the city were to be put to death, not just those who participated in the revolt. However, after sleeping on it overnight

Thucydides writes, “the next day a change of heart, repentance came over them.” Only those who participated in the revolt were put to death.

In another example, a people known as the Dardani had decided to attack the city of Macedonia while King Philip was away with their army. However, Philip caught wind of their plans and quickly returned. When they heard that Philip was coming, they changed their minds, they repented, and broke off their attack before it began.

When you cry out to God in repentance, that means you are wanting your life to be changed, the whole direction or course of your life to be changed. That’s repentance.

V. Restoration

Once Israel cries out to God in repentance, God sends a judge, a deliverer who brings restoration. God always responds to our repentance. That’s the final stage— restoration. They have rebelled against God. God in turn has rejected them, and they face ruin at the hands of their enemies. They cry out to God in repentance, and finally God brings restoration by providing a deliverer.

In verse 18 it says, *“Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them.”*

The phrase that gets repeated each time Israel experiences restoration is this, *“The land had rest.”* 3:11, *“So the land had rest forty years.”* 3:30, *“So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years.”* 5:31, *“And the land had rest for forty years.”* 8:28, *“And the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon.”*

There’s the problem right there. The cycle never seemed to stop with restoration. They would experience rest, peace, prosperity for a few decades, but every time one of the very next verses is, *“And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord,”* and the cycle starts all over again. Every time they rebelled, they forgot the ways of God, and they started worshipping other gods.

If you study judges closely, you’ll notice that each time Israel rebels and restarts the cycle, they plunge a little deeper. It gets worse. The judges are less effective. In fact, in some cases, such as Samson, the judges themselves are hardly commendable. You’ll notice the last time it says the land had rest was in Judges 8. Israel doesn’t really experience rest after that.

They have a judge that rules for a few years here and a few years there. They push back their enemies temporarily, but there's no rest. There's no restoration. They're just slowing the descent as Israel spirals out of control.

That how it can seem in our own lives as we get caught in our own cycle of sin. We may experience times of victory, moments of rest, but every time we seem to fall right back into it. Is it a hopeless trap? Is there no escape? Are we destined to spiral out of control? Nope. We have hope. There is healing. We can find rest for our souls.

There are two things that I want to point out to you. The first is the incredible patience of God. God was so patient and merciful with Israel over more than 300 years' time. He gave them chance after chance. He heard their cry every time. He sent judges to deliver over and over again. God is incredibly patient with you too. Even if you blow it over and over again. He is merciful and he hears your cry. Hebrews 4:16 says, *"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*

Secondly, and this is the thing that really sets us apart from Old Testament Israel, and that is the power of the indwelling Spirit. We have the Holy Spirit who dwells within us to help give us victory over sin. Israel didn't have that. Listen to what God's Spirit did in Judges. Pay attention to the prepositions. Speaking of the judge Othniel in Judges 3:10 it says, "The Spirit of the Lord was **upon** him, and he judged Israel." 6:34 says, "But the Spirit of the LORD **clothed** Gideon." Judges 11:29 says, "The Spirit of the LORD was **upon** Jephthah." Judges 14:6, "The the Spirit of the LORD rushed **upon** him." The judges had the Spirit of the LORD upon them.

Do you know what's different between you and the judges of ancient Israel? If you are a Christian, you have the Spirit of God within you, not just upon you. You have something that no judge had. You have something that no hero of the Old Testament had. You have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to guide you, strengthen you, and to defend you. 1 Corinthians 3:16 says, "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"